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Viewing cable 06ISTANBUL832, FETHULLAH GULEN: WHY ARE HIS FOLLOWERS TRAVELING?

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06ISTANBUL832	2006-05-23 12:02	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Consulate Istanbul

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.taraf.com.tr/haber/abd-belgelerinde-fethullah-gulen.htm>

VZCZCXRO4814
PP RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHMOS RUEHPW
DE RUEHIT #0832/01 1431202
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231202Z MAY 06 ZDK
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4933
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RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000832

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/22/2015
TAGS: [CVIS](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [KFRD](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: FETHULLAH GULEN: WHY ARE HIS FOLLOWERS TRAVELING?

REF: A. 05 ISTANBUL 1336
[1](#)B. 04 ISTANBUL 10

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¶1. (C) Summary: Fethullah Gulen sits at the center of a vast and growing network encompassing more than 160 affiliated organizations in over 30 countries, including over 50 in the U.S. As a result, Gulen supporters account for an increasing proportion of Mission Turkey's nonimmigrant visa applicant pool. As applicants, Gulenists are almost uniformly evasive about their purpose of travel and their relationships to Gulen, raising questions among Consular officers. Our unease is also shared by secular segments of Turkish society. End Summary.

Gulen's Network has Global Reach

¶2. (C) Since before arriving in the U.S. in 1999 on a nonimmigrant tourist visa, Fethullah Gulen, 65, has been at the apex of a growing global network of organizations that profess a peace-loving, ecumenical vision of Islam. Founding and funding predominantly secular schools and other educational-related services -- staffed by Gulen's followers -- is one of his movement's major goals. Nonetheless, Gulen has come under Turkish Government scrutiny at various times in his life, though this month an Ankara court acquitted him of seeking to overthrow Turkey's secular state.

¶3. (C) Gulen's activities first piqued Consular officers, interest several years ago when applicants began to appear seeking to visit a number of charter schools in the U.S. with which Consular officers were unfamiliar. As the majority of the schools had the words "science" and/or "academy" in their names, they were easy to identify and track. Since that time, using information gleaned from thousands of interviews and application forms, Consular officers have compiled a substantial list of organizations that seem in some way affiliated with Gulen. Applicants who we think may be affiliated with his movement come from a variety of backgrounds and apply across the full spectrum of visa classes as tourists, students and exchange visitors. At our last count, Gulen's movement included:

- Over 30 science academies (set up as charter schools) in the U.S.;
- 52 international science academies in Central Asia / Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Africa, SE Asia, the Far East, the Middle East and Europe;
- 24 affiliated schools in Turkey;
- 34 educational consultancies and educational foundations (22 of which are in the U.S.);
- 6 publications and news outlets (including Zaman newspaper in Turkey);
- Various business concerns, including Hacibaba, a Turkish restaurant chain now expanding to the U.S., and Atlas, a construction and food services firm operating in Turkey and Texas; and
- Over a dozen other organizations and benefactors (including influential Turkish business associations such as ISHAD (Business Life Foundation), MARIFED (Marmara Business Federation), and TUSCON (Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists)). The latter umbrella organization claims 9,000 members.

¶4. (C) As the spiritual leader at the center of this growing network, Gulen himself attracts hundreds of visitors from Turkey every year who seek to meet him or hear him preach. After interviewing hundreds of applicants whom we suspect are affiliated with Gulen's movement, Consular officers have noticed that most of these applicants share a common characteristic: they are generally evasive about their

purpose of travel to the United States and usually deny knowing or wanting to visit Gulen when questioned directly.

15. (C) These applicants generally are not forthcoming about the source of their travel funds. They frequently write "myself" or "my company" in response to the travel-funding question on the DS-156 application form, but when pressed to clarify the exact source of funds, only vaguely answer that "my company" or "the organization" will pay. When pressed further as to why "the organization" or "the company" would

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fund a tourist trip or course of study in the absence of any obvious and strong direct ties, most applicants cannot provide officers with straightforward, convincing answers; it appears that either the applicants themselves don't fully understand or they are hesitant to be forthcoming about the truth.

What is the Profile of Gulen Applicant?

16. (C) Although the suspicions engendered among Consular officers by this evasiveness of both purpose and funding source often result in visa denials, these presumed adherents remain reticent about revealing their affiliation with Gulen. Some applicants subsequently have explained this reticence in the context of either fear of reprisal by the secular Turkish establishment or uncertainty about the U.S. government's position towards Gulen.

17. (C) Since Consular officers began actively compiling a list of Gulenist organizations several years ago (as well as periodically meeting to discuss trends within the Gulenist applicant pool), Consular officers in Ankara and Istanbul have noticed what appears to a purposeful "shifting" of applicant profiles appearing for visa interviews in what may be an effort by Gulenists to identify "successful" profiles. The most common profiles we have recognized over the past several years include:

-- The young exchange visitor: Noted above as the first group that gained Consular officers' attention, these were predominately young, male college graduates applying for J-1 exchange visas to teach in science academies in the U.S. Most had some prior education or teaching experience in the Central Asian republics. We refused visas to the majority of these single males with limited work experience. One year later, in 2004, many of these applicants returned with H1-B petitions sponsored by Gulen-affiliated science academies. Interestingly, taking into account the processing time for H1-B visa petitions, it appears that the H1-B petition paperwork for these applicants may have been filed even before their J-1 visa interviews.

-- The married middle-aged male with no English and traveling alone: Over the past two years, we have seen a strong upswing in the number of married middle-aged businessmen who speak no English traveling alone for "tourism" or "business" to New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. The majority of these applicants have little or no prior international travel and those who do have traveled only to Central Asia, the Balkans and Saudi Arabia. Since their visa cases were not compelling on the surface, Consular officers, in the course of digging deeper to understand why they wanted to travel to the U.S., uncovered their desire to visit Gulen, often through very direct questioning. Most of the applicants still failed to qualify for visas. Since mid-2005, we have seen many of the same applicants -- and profile of applicant -- applying as members of local business groups by counterpart U.S.-based Turkish-American business organizations to look into "business opportunities."

-- The middle-school-aged English student: Since the summer of 2005, we have seen hundreds of mostly male middle-school

students participating in both short and long-term English exchange programs between their Turkish schools and the Gulen-affiliated Putnam Science Academy in Connecticut. Most of these applicants come from middle-class families whose fathers own medium-sized businesses (15-50 employees). The issuance rate to these children from stable middle-class families is over 90 percent.

-- The graduate student going for English: Since February 2006, over 50 young male teachers have applied for F-1 visas, claiming no knowledge of English and stating that it is required for their graduate studies. All of these applicants have recently graduated from known Gulen-affiliated universities in Turkey. Their profiles are similar to the "young exchange visitor," but they lack work or travel experience. Their tendency to apply individually to the same U.S. institutions -- in this example clearly unaffiliated with Gulen's movement -- is one way that they come to our attention. For example, nearly 50 percent of applicants in this profile were going to Rice University and the University of Houston, perhaps to be near 12 Texas organizations or schools we think are Gulen-affiliated. Half of the applicants were persistent, applying two or more times.

18. (C) The one clear counter-example of Gulen-affiliated applicants who do not display his characteristic evasiveness

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is the professional businessmen belonging to Turkish business associations such as ISHAD and MARIFED. They are the owners and managers of medium-to-large organizations who leverage their affiliation in these groups to further their business interests in Turkey and overseas (including the U.S.). They are able to present clear compelling need to travel to the U.S., quite apart from any affiliation with Gulen's movement.

Is There More to the Story Than Meets the Eye?

19. (C) Our "through the window" experiences with the Gulenists have enabled us to compile a substantial list of Gulen-affiliated organizations around the world, shedding light on their travel patterns and some of their personal characteristics. However, beyond the possible Gulenist concern that their movement might be viewed negatively by the Turkish or U.S. Governments, we have gained relatively little insight into the reasons behind these applicants, evasiveness when applying for visas. We know the network of affiliated and associated schools, foundations, organizations and benefactors continues to expand rapidly, as seen through the work and travel experiences of our applicants, but we do not know if the network's activities go beyond providing education and spreading Gulen's professed peace-loving, ecumenical vision of Islam. To document our encounters with Gulenist applicants to whom we issue visas, we routinely subject them to security advisory opinion clearances (Ref B).

Comment

10. (C) In Turkey, Gulenist applicants, the majority with travel and work connections to these regions, have become a regular and growing part of the nonimmigrant visa applicant pool. We estimate that they comprise three to five percent of Mission Turkey's annual NIV caseload of approximately 75,000 applicants. While on the surface a benign humanitarian movement, the ubiquitous evasiveness of Gulenist applicants -- coupled with what appears to be a deliberate management of applicant profiles over the past several years -- leaves Consular officers uneasy, an uneasiness echoed within Turkey by those familiar with the Gulenists. More information, presented by the Gulenist movement itself, is available at <http://fetullahgulen.org/>.
JONES